



Is Co-Teaching Effective?

By Marilyn Friend and DeAnna Hurley-Chamberlain

If you've ever traveled by car with a young child or an impatient companion, you know all too well that a journey can seem to take much longer than it should. The same seems to be true for demonstrating the effectiveness of co-teaching. Although co-teaching as a means for providing special education services to students with disabilities in general education settings has been discussed for two decades, few data have been published that demonstrate its effectiveness. Now, with No Child Left Behind and Individuals with Disabilities Education Act mandates for access, least restrictive environment, and highly qualified teachers, interest in co-teaching is higher than ever before—as is the need to demonstrate the impact of co-teaching on student learning.

Conflicting Co-Teaching Definitions

Co-teaching has been used synonymously with collaboration, teaming, team teaching, and inclusion—and each of those terms is unique. It also has been used to describe both situations in which paraprofessionals work in the classroom and those in which special educators, speech-language therapists, or other professionals are the teaching partners. Each of these types of partnership is valuable, but are they the same?

What Co-Teaching Is; What It Is Not

Some of the essential characteristics of co-teaching include the following:

- Co-teaching is a service delivery option. It is a means through which students with IEPs receive some or all of their specialized instruction and related services in the context of the general education classroom.
- Two or more professionals with equivalent licensure or status are co-teachers, one who is a general educator and one who is a special educator or specialist.
- Both professionals participate fully, although differently, in the instructional process. General educators maintain primary responsibility for the content of the instruction; special educators hold primary responsibility for facilitating the learning process. Instruction employs evidence-based practices and accountable differentiation.
- The students are heterogeneously grouped as a class, and both teachers work with all students. Various combinations of students and group sizes are used, so each student's educational potential is realized. Co-teachers are firmly committed to "our" students, not "yours" and "mine."

Just as important as clarifying the characteristics of co-teaching is noting what it is not. It is not a general education classroom with one "real" teacher and one who serves as "the help" or "an extra set of hands." Nor is it a pullout special education program that has been re-located to the corner of a general education classroom.

Factors that Influence the Effectiveness of Co-Teaching

Even with a clear understanding of co-teaching, roadblocks to studying it are still plentiful. One significant challenge is its complexity. The outcomes for co-teaching may be influenced by these factors, to name a few:

- Ages or grade levels of the students.
- Content being taught.
- Instructional strategies teachers use.
- Teachers' knowledge and skills as professional educators.
- Teachers' commitment to co-teaching and "chemistry" as a partnership.
- Amount of shared teaching time each day.
- Length of time the partnership has existed.
- How students are scheduled into classes.
- Extent of administrative support.

Lack of Evidence on Co-Teaching's Effectiveness

Practice should be guided by data that indicates what works and what does not. For co-teaching, this roadmap for practice still is not clear. Much of what has been written about co-teaching consists of explanations for it and advice on how to create and sustain co-teaching programs. Such information is valuable, but it is just a beginning and it is not evidence of effectiveness. Studies of co-teaching have, in large part, focused on the perceptions of teachers and students. These studies generally find that students have a positive response to co-teaching. Teachers' responses are somewhat more complex. They recognize the value of classroom partnerships, but they express concern about its appropriateness for some students, its feasibility given pressures for high stakes testing and other accountability measures, and its practicality given current funding and staffing patterns for special education.

The missing piece in co-teaching concerns academic and other outcomes for students. Local school districts are using their own measures to demonstrate that students' achievement and behavior improves in co-taught classes, but more formal research that directly addresses these key issues is sorely needed. Do students with disabilities achieve at the same or a higher rate in co-taught than other service options? What is the impact of co-teaching on other students? Does student behavior improve in co-taught classes?

How You Can Gather Evidence on Co-Teaching's Effectiveness

Though we do not have all the evidence on co-teaching's effectiveness, the knowledge base on it is growing. If you are implementing co-teaching, you can create your own evidence of effectiveness by taking these steps:

- Ensure that teachers who are co-teaching receive professional development so they maximize the contribution of both partners. That is, be certain the service being called co-teaching represents the best of what it can be.
 - Use curriculum based and other measures that can document the amount of educational progress students (both those with and without disabilities) make in co-taught classes. Remember that high stakes testing often is too broad a measure to capture the progress of students with significant learning challenges.
 - Gather other related information. For example, data related to student behavior or discipline referrals can provide insights into the impact of co-teaching on students' ability to succeed in general education settings.
 - Track student progress across time and grade levels. By following the achievement of students as they proceed through a school year and then across grade levels, a more detailed picture of the impact of co-teaching can be created.
 - Keep in mind all the factors that influence co-teaching outcomes for students. When students are successful, try to specify what occurred that might have made a particular contribution to that success. When problems are noted, make adjustments based on the data.
- Co-teaching has tremendous potential to help students reach the high standards set for education today. At the same time, it has to be constructed with a strong foundation and the

understanding that no single road is the answer for every journey. It takes hard work to demonstrate when co-teaching is valuable and for whom. Perhaps most importantly, it will take the collaborative efforts of many professionals.

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